

The Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland Museum of Art Presents Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950

News Release

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Exhibition documents the first decade of photographs of this pioneering American artist's career

Cleveland, OH (March 25, 2019) – Gordon Parks (1912–2006) considered his work during the 1940s to be the benchmark for his 60-year career. ***Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*** documents the importance of Parks' early experiences in shaping his groundbreaking, passionate vision. Featuring around 120 works, the exhibition traces his rapid evolution from an accomplished, self-taught photographer to an independent artistic and journalistic voice widely communicating a meaningful and coherent understanding of critical social and cultural issues. Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in collaboration with The Gordon Parks Foundation, ***Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*** is on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from March 23 to June 9, 2019, in the Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation Exhibition Gallery.

"We are delighted to present ***Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950***, the first exhibition to showcase the formative beginnings of the artist's extraordinary career," said William Griswold, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art. "The exhibition offers visitors a unique opportunity to view works from a critically important period and provides a detailed look at his development as a photographer."

Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950 incorporates in-depth selections from Parks' photographic essays, including the Tuskegee Airmen's contributions to the war effort, the results of school segregation in his hometown, the world of a 17-year-old Harlem gang leader and the story of Ella Watson, pictured with her mop and broom in Parks' famous image *Washington D.C. Government charwoman*, popularly known as *American Gothic*. Included alongside a number of individual images are the artist's contact sheets, which contain prints of several negatives on a roll of film. Intended to allow him to quickly scan the results of a shoot and easily share them with photo editors, the contact sheets offer viewers unique insight into Parks' working practice and thought process.

“Gordon Parks was drawn to photography when he realized, as he later recollected, ‘that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all kinds of social wrongs,’” said Barbara Tannenbaum, curator of photography and chair of prints, drawings and photographs. “In the span of a decade, Parks went from working as a railroad porter to becoming the first African American staff photographer at *Life* magazine,” said Tannenbaum. “Self-taught, he became a brilliant portraitist and a master of the photo essay. Having personally experienced racism, poverty and discrimination, he understood and empathized with those whose stories he so powerfully conveyed in his images. Parks’ work for the U.S. government and the new picture magazines such as *Life* and *Ebony* helped influence social change in America. This exhibition not only chronicles the start of his groundbreaking career but also provides insight into a particularly tumultuous decade in American history.”

Produced at a time when images began to proliferate in picture magazines, Parks’ early commissions—which ranged from government and industrial work to fashion and photojournalism—provide an engaging study of the variety of purposes and meanings of his photographs. In addition, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue examine the role of government and corporate archives in encouraging creativity and innovation in photography, the importance of World War II in establishing a role for photography in the civil rights movement and the expanding function of mass media in creating and distributing a new visual culture.

Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950 is organized into five sections that chart a chronology of the artist’s formative decade.

A Choice of Weapons

Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Chicago

In 1928, at age 15, Parks, who was originally from segregated Fort Scott, Kansas, was sent north to Saint Paul, Minnesota, to live with his older sister following the death of their mother. In 1937, struck by photographs of dust-bowl migrants seen in a magazine, he decided to become a photographer. After buying his first camera at a pawnshop, Parks taught himself to use it and soon was making portraits for African American newspapers in the Twin Cities and photographing stylish fashions for a Saint Paul clothing shop.

Socialite and model Marva Louis, wife of boxer Joe Louis, saw Parks’ fashion work and invited him to show his photographs in Chicago. Still needing other jobs to make ends meet, he accepted a position as a railroad porter that afforded him frequent layovers in Chicago, where he began to establish significant cultural ties.

Government Work

Farm Security Administration, Washington, D.C.

In April 1942, a year after moving to Chicago, Parks was awarded a fellowship of \$1,800 from the Julius Rosenwald Fund “to assist you in carrying forward your photographic work for a twelve-month period.” He moved to Washington, D.C., for a position in the Farm Security Administration (FSA)’s Historical Section, which was charged with documenting the people and conditions of rural America during the Great Depression. Parks’ fellowship year proved to be transformative, granting him access

to high-quality equipment and a fast-paced photo lab, as well as the mentoring of Historical Section director Roy Stryker and the expertise of other FSA photographers.

Upon arrival in Washington during the early days of World War II, Parks discovered a largely segregated city. Channeling his anger at the injustices he experienced—he was turned away from restaurants and theaters and could not shop at the department stores—he often pursued stories that featured African Americans at work, in tenement homes and newly constructed housing or at places of worship, providing a uniquely broad and varied portrait of African American life during the war's early years.

In July 1942 Parks began to photograph Ella Watson, who cleaned the offices of the Department of Agriculture where the Farm Security Administration (FSA) was located. Parks began creating groups or sequences of photographs around a theme, making Watson, her work, family, neighborhood and religious life the subject of his first extended picture story.

The Home Front

Office of War Information, Washington, D.C.

By the end of September 1942, the FSA photography section moved into the Office of War Information (OWI), a new agency charged with consolidating the federal information services related to the war effort. Parks was invited to join the group of photographers making the transfer. Subsequently, many of his shooting assignments related to the OWI's journalistic and propagandist needs.

Parks photographed children in the tenements of Washington's segregated southwest quarter, an area slated for urban renewal. In April 1943 he moved to New York, where he made pictures of people in Harlem, which give a sense of the mood on the streets. He also did a study of the Fulton Fish Market for an OWI project on food production and later documented the fishing fleet in Massachusetts and munitions factories in Connecticut. For the OWI, Parks also photographed the final training process for one of the first groups of African American fighter pilots—the 332nd Fighter Group—then based at Selfridge Field, near Detroit.

Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)

Shortly after his return to New York in January 1944, Parks was hired as one of a small, talented team of photographers working for the public relations arm of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) (SONJ) to help remake the public image of the troubled corporation and humanize the “men of oil.” Above all, they pictured the men and women who worked for the corporation and its international subsidiaries, presenting the everyday face of petroleum production and its impact on communities. SONJ's photography project became one of the most important documents of the ongoing transition to industrial, petroleum-based economies during this time.

Mass Media

New York

Beginning in 1945, Parks did more assignment work for magazines, including *Ebony*, *Circuit's Smart Woman*, *Glamour* and *Life*. His work for *Ebony*—an illustrated monthly dedicated to African American

social, political and cultural issues—expanded the scope of his subjects and gave him more freedom to experiment with narrative and aesthetic ideas. In 1947 Parks was recruited to be art director of the Chicago-based African American lifestyle magazine *Circuit's Smart Woman*, and the following year he did a number of fashion and feature shoots for Condé Nast's *Glamour*.

Parks left Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) when, in 1948, *Life* agreed to publish “Harlem Gang Leader,” a picture story he had been thinking about for at least three years. It grew out of a project he had already started with writer Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) about the connections among poverty, race and mental health.

Following the success of “Harlem Gang Leader,” *Life*'s executive editor hired Parks in February 1949 as the first African American photographer on staff. Just three days later, Parks traveled to Europe, where he spent the next few months photographing fashion, movie stars and artists. This work launched an international career that took him to destinations as diverse as Puerto Rico, Portugal and frequently Paris, where in 1950 he began a two-year assignment with the magazine.

Programming

Special Exhibition Tours

Wednesday, April 3–Sunday, June 2

Wednesdays, 2:00 p.m.; Fridays, 7:00 p.m.; and Sundays, 3:00 p.m.

Free

Join CMA volunteer docents for tours of *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*. Tours are limited to 25 participants and depart from the information desk in the atrium. Register online or call the ticket center at 216-421-7350.

Curator Talk

Tuesdays, April 2, 16 and 30, Noon

Free; no registration required.

Join curator of photography Barbara Tannenbaum on a series of gallery talks, each focusing on a different section of *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*.

- April 2, Photography: Parks' Choice of Weapons
- April 16, Canvassing the Country for Standard Oil
- April 30, Infiltrating the Mass Media

MIX: Funk

Friday, April 5, 6:00–10:00 p.m.

\$10 in advance, \$15 day of event; CMA members free.

Gordon Parks' skill at storytelling in his early photographs makes his later career as a filmmaker seem inevitable. With 1971's *Shaft*, Parks directed one of the first Blaxploitation films. *Shaft* featured a primarily black cast and a soundtrack filled with funk and soul music, a sound that permeated

American culture and lived on well past the 1970s. Celebrate the exhibition *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950* with a night of funk music and all of its variations, from soul to Afrobeat. Featuring spoken-word performances, artist-led tours, specialty cocktails and more.

Salon

Friday, May 24, 7:00 p.m.

Ames Family Atrium

Enjoy a dialogue about Parks' connection to figures from the Chicago Black Renaissance with Oberlin College English professor Gillian Johns, Daniel Gray-Kontar from Twelve Literary Arts and photographer Tonika Johnson.

Films

Two Films by Gordon Parks Followed by Curator Q&A

Enjoy two acclaimed feature films directed by Gordon Parks, both shown from 35mm film. Admission for each film is \$12, CMA members \$9. Curator of photography Barbara Tannenbaum answers audience questions after the screenings on April 16, 28 and 30.

The Learning Tree

Tuesday, April 16, 1:45 p.m., and Friday, April 19, 7:00 p.m.

Morley Lecture Hall

Directed by Gordon Parks. Gordon Parks' feature film directorial debut—one of the first 25 movies selected for the Library of Congress's National Film Registry—is based on his semiautobiographical novel. Two black teens who witness assorted injustices and tragedies while growing up in 1920s Kansas take different paths to adulthood. (USA, 1969, color, 35mm, 107 min.)

Leadbelly

Sunday, April 28, 1:30 p.m., and Tuesday, April 30, 1:45 p.m.

Morley Lecture Hall

Directed by Gordon Parks. With Roger E. Mosley. The hardship-plagued life of legendary folk and blues singer Huddie Ledbetter (1888–1949), master of the 12-string guitar, is dramatized in this screen biography. Musical numbers include “Rock Island Line” and “Goodnight Irene.” (USA, 1976, color, 35mm, 126 min.)

Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue, produced and published by the Gordon Parks Foundation and Steidl in association with the National Gallery of Art, accompanies the exhibition. The catalogue features extensive new research and an illustrated timeline of Parks' origins and early career, as well as reproductions of all the photographs in the exhibition (some previously unpublished) and a selection of ephemera related to Parks' early career.

Additionally, the catalogue presents essays by exhibition curator Philip Brookman; Sarah Lewis, assistant professor, Department of History of Art and Architecture and Department of African and

African American Studies, Harvard University; Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History, Duke University; Deborah Willis, university professor and chair, Department of Photography and Imaging, Tisch School of the Arts, and director, Institute of African American Affairs / Center for Black Visual Culture, New York University; and Maurice Berger, research professor and chief curator, Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in collaboration with The Gordon Parks Foundation

Bank of America is proud to be the national sponsor of *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*.

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About the Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland Museum of Art is renowned for the quality and breadth of its collection, which includes more than 63,000 artworks and spans 6,000 years of achievement in the arts. The museum is a significant international forum for exhibitions, scholarship and performing arts and is a leader in digital innovations. One of the top comprehensive art museums in the nation, recognized for its award-winning Open Access program and free of charge to all, the Cleveland Museum of Art is located in the University Circle neighborhood.

The museum is supported in part by residents of Cuyahoga County through a public grant from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture and made possible in part by the Ohio Arts Council (OAC), which receives support from the State of Ohio and the National Endowment for the Arts. The OAC is a state agency that funds and supports quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally and economically. For more information about the museum and its holdings, programs and events, call 888-CMA-0033 or visit [cma.org](https://www.clevelandart.org) [1].

[Press Announcements](#) [2]

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